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RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA PRIORITY 2689  
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM PRIORITY 1942  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 2721  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 2651  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NAIROBI 000706

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [KE](#)

SUBJECT: MOUNT ELGON CLASHES: KENYA'S ARMY STEPS IN

REF: A. NAIROBI 653

[B](#). 07 NAIROBI 1603

Classified By: Ambassador Michael E. Ranneberger, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On March 10, Kenya's military deployed to Mount Elgon, which has been the center of a violent land dispute since 2006. Previous efforts by the police to quell the violence have been unsuccessful. The settlement of the post-election political dispute between President Kibaki and Prime Minister-designate Raila Odinga set the stage for the military intervention to make a renewed effort. The violence in Mount Elgon predates the post-election crisis and its continuation bears no relation -- causal or otherwise -- to the separate issue of political power-sharing within Kenya's new coalition government. Mount Elgon, on the other hand, does demonstrate the incendiary nature of land tenure issues in Kenya and the urgent need for the coalition government to address land reform in a comprehensive way. End Summary.

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Kenya's Army Moves In to Mount Elgon  
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[1](#)2. (C) On March 10, the Kenyan Government stepped up its efforts to quell violence in the long-troubled Mount Elgon region in Kenya's Western Province. (Note: The violence in Mount Elgon, which started in 2006, predates the post-election crisis. Its continuation thus bears no relation -- causal or otherwise -- to the separate issue of political power-sharing within Kenya's new coalition government. End Note.) Kenya's Director of Military Intelligence confirmed to the Defense Attache that Kenya's armed forces moved two infantry companies into the southern area of the mountain along the Ugandan border to target the Sabaot Land Defense Force (SLDF), an informal militia drawn from members of the Soy subclan of the Kalenjin tribe that may number in the thousands. So far, Kenyan troops have found an SLDF training area and a weapons cache in the heavily forested border area. According to press reports, they have detained 51 suspected militia members.

[1](#)3. (U) The military operation came in the wake of a March 4 SLDF raid west of Kitale that killed 12 people. (This is not the first time the Kenyan military has deployed to the Mount Elgon area.) According to press reports, SLDF militia burned five people alive inside a house, shot four others, and beheaded three more. Witnesses said that the victims had fled Mt. Elgon in 2007 and may have been killed because they refused to allow their sons to join the militia or provide

the SLDF with protection money and food.

¶4. (C) Member of Parliament for Mount Elgon, Fred Kapondi, accused government troops of targeting populated areas instead of rounding up militia members; however, a Kenya Red Cross official dismissed as inaccurate reports that 30,000 people have been newly displaced as a result of the operation. "While we stand ready to provide assistance, we do not anticipate large scale displacements as a result of the current military operation," the official said. So far, the government has reported one casualty, reportedly an SLDF member. (Note: News reports indicate that hundreds of people have fled to Uganda for shelter. A local religious leader told PolOff that 100 people are rumored to have been killed in the operation, although it would be difficult to tell if they were militia members: women and boys as young as eight are among those who have been inducted into the SLDF, he said. End Note.)

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Land Dispute Fuelled the Conflict  
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¶5. (U) Disputes between the Ndorobo and Soy subclans of the Kalenjin tribe over the allocation of government land have been at the heart of the Mt. Elgon conflict (ref B). The hunter-gatherer Ndorobo (also referred to as Ogiek or Mosop) were evicted from their ancestral lands in the forested upper slopes of Mt. Elgon in the early 1970's. After a severe drought (and a desire to conserve the biodiversity of the area, which later became a national park), the government relocated them and encouraged them to take up farming. Many did so in Chebyuk, a region where there were also Soy

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pastoralists.

¶6. (U) In a series of settlement phases over the years, the government allocated plots of government land to Ndorobo and (to a lesser degree) Soy families. In 2006, the government implemented the third phase of the Chebyuk land settlement scheme, allocating land to only 1,700 of 7,500 applicants. Accusations of corruption and unfairness tainted the settlement process, and Soy members formed the SLDF that year to contest the allocation formula, under which they felt shortchanged.

¶7. (C) The ensuing clashes have left 45,000 to 70,000 displaced and over 500 dead. Kenyan police efforts to subdue the violence have been ineffective, and accusations of excessive force and even sexual violence against local residents have soured relations with the local community. While military officials have recognized the need to crack down on the SLDF and indeed were tasked with it in October 2007, they were hesitant to do so before the 2007 general elections because of the politically sensitive nature of the task.

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Land Reform Needed to Pacify It  
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¶8. (C) Comment: The Mount Elgon situation is a vivid example of how incendiary land disputes can be in Kenya. It is unclear how successful the current military operation will be in restoring calm. The violence has clearly evolved past the anger at the Chebyuk settlement scheme, and other militias may also be forming (namely, the Ndorobo "Moorland Forces" and the newly-formed "Political Revenge Movement.") Observers have criticized the government's approach to managing the conflict, from the way they managed the settlement scheme (not very well, according to many accounts) to the way they are dealing with the SLDF problem (The SLDF, critics say, are a well-organized and trained force that blends easily into settled areas and has thousands of fighters. They are not 200 fighters hiding in the forest, as

the government has been treating them). While the military operation may impede SLDF's ability to wreak havoc in the short-term, the basic problem -- too many people who want a limited amount of land -- remains.

19. (C) Comment, cont.: During the Ambassador's recent trip to the Rift Valley, the vast majority of interlocutors (including Sabaoth elders and Ogiek civil society) stressed the importance of land reform. The Ambassador in turn emphasized the need for a renunciation of violence to allow access of NGOs and others to provide assistance and to help craft longer-term solutions. Regardless of the outcome of the current operation, legitimate grievances will certainly remain among the communities living around Mount Elgon. Reforming Kenya's land tenure system and supporting marginalized communities will be critical to resolving the immediate conflict in Mount Elgon and preventing similar conflicts from occurring in the future. The recently-agreed power sharing arrangement between President Kibaki's Party of National Unity (PNU) and Prime Minister-designate Raila Odinga's Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) will set the stage for these (and other) important long-term reforms. Both sides have acknowledged the importance of such reforms, and our support could significantly help the process. End Comment.  
RANNEBERGER